

Sermon Matthew 6: 25-35  
Thanksgiving  
November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Whenever I hear today's gospel lesson (Jesus saying, 'Don't worry what you shall eat and drink and what you shall wear'), I am reminded of a certain song. Can you guess which one? 'Don't worry, be happy' by Bobby McFerrin. Anyone here who's never ever heard that song? 'Here's a little song I wrote, you might want to sing it note for note, don't worry – be happy!'

This song was a smash hit in 1988, making it to the no. 1 spot on the U.S. billboards and did very well in Germany, where I am from, too. So apparently there were many who liked this song back then. But then there were also many who didn't - because the lyrics seem to make fun of the hardships of life. 'Ain't got no place to lay your head, somebody came and took your bed; don't worry, be happy. The landlord say your rent is late, he may have to litigate; don't worry, be happy.'

So, believe it or not, this was in a sense a controversial song. Many were offended by its apparent callousness. Imagine you were living out on the street without a roof over your head. Imagine you had to work three jobs to make ends meet. Imagine you were just diagnosed with a debilitating disease. Imagine your life was falling apart for some reason or another. Well, you probably don't have to imagine this, most if not all of us have been there at some point in our lives. And then someone tells you, 'Don't worry, be happy!' I don't know about you, but I'd be like, 'What the...?!'

Now Bobby McFerrin didn't come up with this line, 'Don't worry, be happy'. He saw it on a poster in some friends' apartment in San Francisco. This poster McFerrin saw was from the 60s and showed the picture of Indian mystic, sage and guru, Meher Baba. 'Don't worry, be happy' was like Meher Baba's signature line, his slogan, and he had many followers in the West who followed his simple philosophy – maybe to escape the harsh realities of this world. I mean, the whole hippie and flower power movement with its message of love and peace was a reaction to racial injustice and the Vietnam War. Meher Baba's message fits right in there.

But then, in today's gospel we hear similar words from Jesus. Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink. Don't worry about your clothing. Worrying will not prolong your life. Don't worry about tomorrow.

Now Jesus of course doesn't go so far as to say, 'don't worry, be happy' – Jesus is not a lifestyle guru, after all, although he is sometimes mistaken for one – but his words about not worrying probably offended some of *his* listeners -- maybe some were even turned off by these words. Consider Jesus' audience; he, after all, was talking to those who were suffering under the Roman Empire and its politics. Jesus was talking to peasants, fishermen, and day laborers, to those who didn't know if they'd have enough money by the end of the day to feed their families. Jesus was talking to those who regularly would be slapped on the cheek and be put in their place. Jesus was talking to women, who, together with children, were the least and the last in society and often treated like property. Jesus was talking to the lost, the oppressed, the forgotten, the forsaken. How could they not worry?

Now we for the most part may not worry about food or clothing or a roof over our heads. But even though our basic needs are filled, I think there are plenty of things we worry about.

What are some of the things you worry about?

I worry about climate change and its effects on all the creatures God made. I worry about the escalation of wars in the Middle East and Europe. I worry about what the next four years in this country will bring. I worry about my son, who just can't seem to figure out what to do with his life.

It's not as if we lived in paradise. No, we are far from it. So why would Jesus tell us not to worry?

But let's just think about worry for a moment. Now what is interesting is that the English word 'worry' comes from the old English 'wyrgran' and has its roots in proto-Germanic languages – I have to give you a warning, I am a language nerd. And this word literally means to choke, to strangle.

So worry is a sensation that chokes us – we can't breathe. And when we can't breathe, we become incapacitated, paralyzed. We default to our lizard brain –

it becomes 'fight or flight'. We are stuck in the moment, and we can't – or don't want to – get out of it.

And for hardcore Bible buffs, the Greek word we have in the original text means sole focus on our thoughts - fixation, or anxious fixation.

And what happens when we are anxiously fixated on something? We tend to lose anything else out of sight. And the image of the rabbit staring at the snake comes to mind...

Anxious fixation, worry tends to paralyze us. And we lose the bigger picture out of sight. Like the kingdom of God, or the realm of God, which, according to Isaiah and other prophets, is a realm of peace and reconciliation, a realm where the lion lies next to the lamb, a realm where there is enough for everyone, a realm where death and mourning and crying are no more. In short, paradise restored. *That* should be our main focus. And when we focus on paradise restored, all things fall into place somehow.

And how do we focus on Paradise restored? Well, it involves not just our thoughts and prayers, but our faithful action as well. And faithful action starts – not with worry – but with concern. There is a difference. Concern comes from the Latin and means to 'see with', or to 'see together'. In other words, concern is about the bigger picture.

That puts a whole different spin on Jesus' words to not worry, doesn't it?

Now I want to go back for a moment to Bobby McFerrin's 'Don't worry, be happy', and do him justice. According to his own witness, the lyrics to this song are very tongue-in-cheek; in fact, they are a scathing criticism of American society, where issues and problems often are not dealt with, but rather hidden behind a happy and cheerful and shiny façade. And there is an ironic twist of fate: in the video to this song, you see the late Robin Williams. Williams sure knew what it was like to hide pain and mental illness behind a smiling face. Bobby McFerrin doesn't pretend it's all hunky-dory.

Our holy scriptures don't pretend that things are just fine, but deal with issues like injustice and oppression head-on. One just has to read the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures to realize that God has a big issue with injustice.

And Jesus has a thing or two to say about injustice as well. In that context, Jesus says, 'Don't worry'. Instead, 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness – or justice, that would be another translation -, and all these things you worry about will be given to you as well.'

Put first things first. See the big picture, the REALLY big picture. We are not to worry and to be anxious, because then we are choked, and that doesn't get us anywhere. But we are still called to look with concern at all that is broken around us, and to see how we can bring healing – to all our siblings who hurt on this planet, and to creation that has been abused by human mindless consumption - how we can work for justice, how we can work for peace, how we can bring love into situations where indifference or hatred rule, how we can remain faithful, even though political systems try to snuff love and compassion out of us.

Now how does all this tie into Thanksgiving and gratitude? Well, that would be a whole other sermon, and I'm not going there now. This said, there certainly is a lot to be thankful for – and on this day especially the gift of community, which stretches beyond denominational and religious differences, even nationalities and ethnicities, and is united in its strive to live actively into the realm of God, as it loves justice, practices kindness, and walks humbly with God.

In this sense, I want to wish all of you a joyful and blessed Thanksgiving. Amen